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New network product heralds Linux revolution

E-BIZ

JIM CARROLL

Entrepreneurs are always scouring for technology bargains. That's why this column previously looked at the computer operating system Linux and ways small-business owners can use it as an alternative to more expensive options.

Now, a new product helps entrepreneurs who don't have the time or inclination to learn Linux take advantage of some of the operating system's key features. Network Concierge (**www.nc4u.com**) allows a small-business operator to set up a Linux network server with a range of functions in such a way that even the computer illiterate can master the product.

The straightforward program enables you to take any personal computer — even an old, clunky 486 PC — and turn it into a file/print server for your network of Windows-based computers. You can then use this machine to make available printers or shared files, or to provide each network user with their own private file area. In addition, it will provide a Web server for internal or external use, as well as an E-mail server. It will also let everyone on the network share access to a single Internet connection (such as a cable modem, ADSL connection or other type of connection).

Network Concierge comes with a firewall to prevent outsiders from accessing your internal computer network. You set it up through a simple installation and administration program that is accessed through your Web browser.

This is available at a price of $99 (U.S.). Buy the same capability using products from Microsoft Corp. and others, and you're probably looking at a bill for thousands of dollars.

The advantage of the product is its simplicity. Until now, installing and using Linux required an investment of time, as there's a bit of a learning curve. Network Concierge says anyone can set up it up within 15 minutes — a claim I found to be true.

A subtle change in the marketplace has occurred, and Linux has become the tool of choice among many in the computing industry. Because of its flexibility, Linux has emerged as the "Swiss Army knife" of computing. Developers can take its core elements and put together innovative computer products such as Network Concierge. In addition to products like this, we are already seeing the emergence of many new "network appliances" or specialized computer systems based on Linux, such as point-of-sale systems, fax servers and factory-equipment controller systems.

The result is that entrepreneurs will see a lot of new, inexpensive and extremely functional products.

Jim Carroll is co-author of Small Business Online — A Strategic Guide for Canadian Entrepreneurs, *and can be reached by E-mail at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com*